1980

Midwest China Oral History Interviews

Alma Roisum

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ORAL HISTORY ABSTRACT

BORN: Rice County, Minnesota, 1905.

EARLY LIFE: family background; education; accepts position as secretary to Dr. Watts O. Pye of the American Board, 1925.

CHINA EXPERIENCE: trip to Fenchow, Shensi; description of Fenchow and of the mission compound; responsibilities and lifestyle in Fenchow; problems with the hospital in Fenchow, effects of the China experience.

INTERVIEWER: Jane Baker Koons

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+ Complementary archival and museum material from Alma Roisum is housed in the Midwest China Oral History, Archives and Museum Collection.

INTERVIEW

This is an interview with Alma Roisum. The date is the 20th of November, 1979. The place is Luther-Northwestern Seminaries, and the interviewer is Jane Baker Koons.

Could we begin, please, by your telling when and where you were born?

ROISUM: I was born in 1905 on a farm in Rice County, between Northfield and Kenyon.

I: Would you give us something of your family background?

ROISUM: My parents lived on the farm until I was in third grade, and then we moved to Northfield. I had two brothers and two sisters, and I was the eldest.

I: What is your educational background?

ROISUM: I'm a graduate of St. Olaf, the class of 1932.

I: How did you go to China?

ROISUM: When I graduated from high school, I got a secretarial job at Carleton College. Dr. Watts O. Pye, who was a missionary in Fenchow, and a Carleton graduate, had come to Northfield to receive an honorary degree at commencement when he was home on furlough. Dr. Cowling, who was then president of Carleton College, said that while he could not contribute financially to Dr. Pye's campaign for funds for the work at Fenchow, he was going to be gone for three weeks and he would provide secretarial assistance for Dr. Pye during that time. And that got to be me!

The first letter Dr. Pye dictated was to the American Board Mission Office in Boston, saying that he had been unable to find a secretary to go back to China with him. So I applied to him for this position.

I: So your China experience was between high school and college?

ROISUM: Yes. I was 19 when I went to China. We actually arrived in China on October 25, 1925.

I: Outside of this contact with Dr. Pye, what did you know about China and the mission work there?

ROISUM: Almost nothing.

I: How did your family and friends respond to your going to China at this point?

ROISUM: My mother especially, of course, had reservations about my going. She was very generous in not letting me know how serious those reservations were. I think the rest of the family probably regarded it as something of an adventure.

I: What was the length of your commitment?

ROISUM: It was short-term, so I came back in the summer of 1928 on August 28.

I: Did the American Board Office have reservations about accepting someone as young as you?

ROISUM: I don't know.

I: It sounds as though they were probably delighted to receive your application. Would you describe your journey to China?

ROISUM: I went to California early in order to spend some time with Dr. Pye there and to help in taking care of heavy correspondence. We were three weeks on board ship and landed in Shanghai. We then transferred to a steamer to Tientsin and then by train to Peking. From there, to Fenchow.

I: Did you travel with the Pyes all the way to Fenchow?

ROISUM: Yes, at that time their son Lucien was four years old. He was the only child.

I: Did you have any eventful occurrences crossing the ocean to Shanghai?

ROISUM: One day in Honolulu.

I: Do you recall some of the things the Pyes were telling you before you arrived in China?

ROISUM: Not right at the moment.

I: What were some of your initial impressions?

ROISUM: Coming to the railing of the ship before we got off and seeing this sea of blue. Everyone wore blue jackets of some kind. And the countryside, every square inch utilized, except those mounds that appeared. These were burial grounds which were leveled with the change of dynasty. The train from Peking to Shih Chia Chuang was modern. We had pullman accommodations.

The train from Shih Chia Chuang to Taiyuan (the end of the line) was a narrow gauge railroad. The provincial governor had wisely ordered that. Shansi was saved from many forays or occupations by people who would have come in on ordinary trains.

At the end of the line, someone met us with a car. From there, it was about 60 miles to Fenchow. To see the soil in that part of the country was something. It was soft and powdery, like the feel of talcum powder in your hands. It was dust that had blown in from the Gobi Desert through the ages. It looked like open-topped tunnels all through the countryside because the carts had worn through the soil so that the roads were from four to ten feet below the surface of the fields sometimes.

I: What were the villages and farms like in this area?

ROISUM: People lived in villages and would have to leave their home to work on their "farms." The plots were very small and were cultivated with primitive tools. The principal crops were wheat, millet, and kaffir corn, with some varieties of fruit and vegetables. In the melon patches pebbles and small stones would be piled around each plant at night to keep it warm, and in the morning the stones would be spread out again to absorb the heat of the sun. English walnuts grew in this area, and Dr. Pye had been instrumental in getting an export business started. Sheep would be collected from the courtyards of a street and taken outside the walls to graze during the day. Splotches of colored

paint on the necks served to identify to whom the sheep belonged. Although in a different context, one was reminded of the Biblical reference to the shepherd knowing his sheep.

Fenchow is a walled city. The walls are about 40 feet high with a double gate in the middle of each wall. The top of the wall was wide enough so that if there had been cars up there, two cars could have passed easily.

I: Would you describe your mission compound and its position in relation to the rest of Fenchow?

ROISUM: I travelled almost not at all while I was there because of the disturbed conditions, so I cannot compare our compound with other mission compounds. My impression is that the mistake had been made there, as in other places in those early years, where the houses, the church and the hospital were big and looked like what German castles look like to us these days in comparison with the mud huts of the Chinese. I suppose with what we have learned in the intervening years, the hospital would not have been built the way it was. It was patterned after an American hospital. It may have been too grandiose from the point of view of the people who lived in the street. To see this enormous building and to come into an American-styled hospital would seem way beyond them.

We had a walled compound with houses for the families. The unmarried women lived together in one house. The hospital compound was a little distance from the residential. These were in one corner of the city. I lived in the house with the unmarried women. Mary McClure, Josie Horn, Grace McConnaughey,

Sarah (Sandy) Beech, Emma Noreen, Gertrude Kellogg and I lived together. Gertrude Kellogg and Emma Noreen were nurses. Mary McClure was head of the Bible school for women. Josie Horn was head of the school for girls. Helen Gallagher came later to teach English.

I: How many of these people were from the Midwest or had Carleton connections?

ROISUM: Erwin Hertz, whom I had met when I worked at Carleton, was the one familiar face to greet me at the station. Dr. Pye was a graduate. Paul Reynolds had grown up in Iowa. Dr. Curran, I don't remember where he came from. Emma Noreen was from Minnesota and had gotten her nurses' training at Rochester. Mary McClure and Mrs. Pye were Oberlin graduates. Josie Horn was from southern Minnesota.

I: You were arriving in China at a time when things were quite disturbed. Getting to Fenchow, did you encounter disturbed conditions?

ROISUM: There was no anti-foreign sentiment or anything like that that I was aware of. In 1927, the American Consul ordered us to come to the coast. We went first to Peking and then to Peitaho, a summer resort on the coast. Others were sent to Korea. Those whose furloughs would be due in a year were brought home early. That was the year that many missionaries in Central China had to come home. We went back to Fenchow in the fall. We were without mail for, I suppose, six months. The hospital

got medical supplies by camel and donkey train for at least a big part of the distance because the trains that were running were commandeered by the military. When I left to come home in the summer of 1928, Dr. Percy Watson went with Sandy Beech and me. We got the second train that left from Shih Chia Chuang to Peking and we were wedged inside the car. All the glass was out of the windows, which was fortunate because it gave us air, anyway. There were as many people huddled on the top and hanging on the sides of cars as there were inside. We would be stopped at stations for hours. I forgot how long it took us to get to Peking.

I: Did your parents have any idea of what was happening in China at that time?

ROISUM: I don't think so very much. The Watsons were home in Northfield part of the time I was in Fenchow so my parents heard from them what the conditions were likely to be.

I: When you initially arrived in Fenchow, what were your responsibilities?

ROISUM: Dr. Pye died very shortly after we reached Fenchow. His death was quite unexpected. He was buried in the valley where the Fenchow and Taiyuan missionaries spent the summer. It was then decided that I would stay on and divide my time among three: two days a week with Mrs. Pye; two days a week with Paul Reynolds, who was in the evangelistic work; and two days a week with Dr. Percy Watson at the hospital.

I: What did Mrs. Pye continue doing after his death?

ROISUM: Writing to foundations and individuals who were interested in and had been supportive of the work.

I: What did you learn of Dr. Watson? Was he involved in any plague work at the time?

ROISUM: Yes, he was. He was gone for long periods of time. The nurses and the Chinese personnel trained under him would take over much of the responsibility of the hospital when he was gone. Through Dr. Watson's dictation, I got some of his plague reports. When he was out in the field, there was very little communication. With my lack of background I really didn't understand much of what they were doing.

I: I know later the Fenchow work, at least the hospital, ran into financial difficulties. Was it having problems at this point?

ROISUM: The reason for much of the correspondence was to raise money. It was a sore point with the mission office in Boston because theoretically the support came from them. I think both Drs. Pye and Watson felt a tremendous responsibility for all that they saw needed to be done. They wanted to use every avenue for support for the work in which they were so vitally interested. They didn't have enough money to expand as they felt their work should be expanded because of the tremendous need which they saw. I remember "Buddy" Kellogg, the nurse, had done some writing on behalf of equipping the hospital and how thrilled

she was when a significant amount came from the Mentholatum people to help in providing financial aid for the training of nurses.

Dr. Walter Judd came to Fenchow after I left.

I: Was the Fenchow work one of the showcases of the American Board?

ROISUM: I have no information about that. One thing that Fenchow was noted for was that Dr. Pye single-handedly had kept the work going during the Boxer Rebellion because the people asked him to stay with them, which he did.

I: How did they introduce you to Fenchow?

ROISUM: Since we got there in late October, the Chinese New Year came not too long after our arrival. We were invited to a number of feasts. I would go with the women I lived with to shop--not for household commodities, but out of interest. It was a three-mile hike around the top of the city wall and that was a favorite walk.

I: Did you have any chance for studying the language?

ROISUM: No, I didn't. I got so that I could understand a little. I am sure that I was cause for a good deal of hilarity when it came to be my turn to plan the menus for the week with our cook. But we managed to eat with the aid of colored pictures from magazines, and so forth.

I: What kind of household staff did you have?

ROISUM: We had three. We had a cook, a general handyman, and a lady who would clean and sew.

I: What was your worship life like in Fenchow?

ROISUM: Erwin Hertz had a choir. I would play piano for him and the choir and sometimes for the church worship. We had Chinese worship in the morning and then the American Board group would gather in one of the homes on Sunday evening for worship.

I: What was the format of the Sunday evening worship?

ROISUM: This varied. There would always be singing. Sometimes the leader would read from favorite authors.

I: What contact did you have with missionaries other than the American Board?

ROISUM: Very little, because of the travel restrictions during that time. Occasionally, but very occasionally, there would be people from farther north and west who would stop on their way out to the coast.

I: Did you have any other mission societies right in Fenchow?

ROISUM: No, we were the only ones. The Catholics were beginning work. I don't know whether they had begun when I left or if it was still in the planning stages. They were starting a middle school. I recall that some students from our school

were transferring to theirs because of financial inducements.

I: What did you know of the political situation? Did you know anything about the warlords?

ROISUM: When you speak of warlords, the only thing that I can remember that affected us personally was the one in our province who commandeered the services of Gertrude Kellogg, our nurse, to take care of his favorite wife. She was gone for weeks and for much of the time we had no word from her. We didn't know what was happening. But she eventually returned.

I: How was the warlord able to commandeer her?

ROISUM: I don't know. Whether he went through Dr. Watson or what, I don't know. I know that she had to go.

One interesting thing to indicate the lack of an ordinary sequence of events, was that word came that there were bandits in the region. To "fortify" the city, men and boys, in their shoulder baskets, carried pebbles from the dry riverbed three miles away to the top of the wall. It was a crenelated wall, so a heap of stones would be placed under each opening in preparation for throwing stones on the bandits in case they should arrive. The bandits did not come, and the children had fun playing with all those stones. Eight years later, Fenchow was bombed by Japanese airplanes. So, in that period of time, it moved from that kind of primitive defense to modern warfare.

I: Did you actually have any encounters with bandits?

ROISUM: Only the rumors of such.

I: The summer of '27 it was safe enough for you to travel to Peking and Peitaho?

ROISUM: They allowed a group to do that instead of going back to America. Practically the whole group was there from Fenchow so that I carred on with my secretarial work. I remember that on clear days we could look across the water and see a U.S. naval vessel tied up at Tsingtao. To some, this probably brought a measure of feeling "safe," but the Shansi group was among those who wanted no "protection" of this kind. We lived in cottages built for vacations. My recollection is that people lived as though on a summer holiday.

We had no problem getting back to Fenchow at the end of the summer, but shortly thereafter railroad communication was cut off.

I: You mentioned going for walks. What else would the Fenchow community do for recreation?

ROISUM: Those who were musical would use their talents in that way. We had compound suppers where the entire group would get together. I suppose reading would be on the top of the list. Nobody seemed to be bored or lacked things with which to occupy themselves.

I: Which Chinese did you come to know the best?

ROISUM: I really didn't get to know them well myself except

for those who were in our house and those who worked in the homes of other missionaries.

I: Do you recall discussions from this time about the role of Chinese leadership?

ROISUM: Yes, I think I have a picture of when we arrived in Peking outside the American Board compound where we stayed. Workmen were in the process of erasing or eliminating the American name of the mission above the gate and putting in the Chinese name. I do remember that Paul Reynolds, especially, and I think others, too, were very much concerned that the missionaries not be lumped with the big companies who had business relations. They wanted to be co-workers with the Chinese and were ready to turn over leadership responsibilities insofar as it was possible for them to arrange to do that. As I was given to understand, there was much less friction among the American Board personnel than among some of the other societies in that regard. They were much more open to this.

I: Did you have foreign businessmen in the Fenchow community?

ROISUM: I don't know.

I: What was the feeling among your housemates about whether there was still a need for missionaries?

ROISUM: Oh, I think they felt that they were still needed. The first year that I was there I recall two men who had come up through the schools and had been pinpointed for leadership roles.

They had studied in American schools and were returning to Fenchow. It sort of brought home the fact of how long it takes to bring a person from childhood up through the system to where they are ready to assume responsibility.

I: What did you feel was the role of the single woman?

ROISUM: There again, I didn't have enough experience to realize much of what was happening in that area. Since I was short-term, if I had known, I suppose I thought it wouldn't have affected me much. I really think back with much gratitude for many things, but especially for the relationships that were formed. I later, of course, have been supportive and so eager that people with the best minds and the best training go to the mission field.

I: What did you feel was the caliber of the people with whom you were working?

ROISUM: The best.

I: While you were in Fenchow, did you have experiences with natural disasters?

ROISUM: The flooding of the Yellow River, although not very near.

I: How did you respond at your age to the poverty?

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ROISUM: When you had no experience, you couldn't talk with them about many things because they couldn't relate to it. You

had to really get down to basics. Everything was so new and different, of course. I don't know how to describe it. They had miserable mud hut walls in which they lived--without sanitation.

I: Was the summer of '28 the time that had been predetermined for you to go back home?

ROISUM: Yes.

I: How was it for you to leave?

ROISUM: I had liked living there. I had enjoyed the people very much. When I was approached a couple of years later about returning, it would have been very easy to have gone back except that I had decided to finish college.

I: What was your route back to the U.S.?

ROISUM: Boat from Japan to Vancouver, where the fliers with their plane were taken off first so they could resume their flight to New York--setting a round-the-world record--26 days, I think! And then by train home. I started to attend St. Olaf that fall.

I: What contact did you maintain with the Fenchow people after you returned?

ROISUM: I kept close contact with Mary McClure. She died from cholera in India on one of her return trips back from furlough. And with Josie Horn. I kept closest contact with the Paul Reynolds family. On one of their furloughs they spent

a year in Berea. And Emma Noreen to a lesser extent when she'd be home on furlough. And the Hertz'.

I: What was your college major?

ROISUM: English.

I: Did you consider going back to China after St. Olaf?

ROISUM: It did occur to me. But when the opportunity came to go to Berea, that seemed like where I should go. Mary McClure, an Oberlin graduate, had spent Christmas with the Hutchins family and she wrote about Berea. I was to finish that spring and there were not too many jobs open. I wrote to see if there was a position there. There was none at the time, but later in the spring a position opened. The connections with the Oberlin-China people, the Francis Hutchins, played into my decision. When I first went to Berea, the saying was, in order to get a staff position at Berea, you had to be either from Oberlin or China but preferably both. I was at Berea then for 10 years. From there, I came to the education office of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and worked with J.C.K. Preus.

I: As you look back at the time you spent in China, how do you think it has affected your outlook, your interests?

ROISUM: From a personal point of view, the idea of friendships having no age barrier. Of the six or seven of us who lived together in Fenchow, I was the youngest and the oldest was 60-ish. But we all did the same things. I think that was the

first time that that was really open to me. And, of course, being interested in China, although I have not been the student of events I should have been.

I: You mentioned earlier that you would encourage top-notch people to go into the mission field. Are there other mission experiences that you gained?

ROISUM: I think one thing has been corroborated by people who have been on foreign mission fields. A person needs inner resources, a person cannot be dependent on another person all the time. I'm sure we all know of wives who have been desperately unhappy on the mission field and it isn't that they haven't been fine people; but they haven't had enough inner resources to carry them through periods of loneliness and isolation.

I: How about the wives that you knew in Fenchow? What was their primary commitment--family or work? Were there struggles between those?

ROISUM: I really can't say how much, but some of them had been involved in elementary, practical public health measures with mothers. Of course, until their own children were ready to be sent to high school board
education.

I: How much news did you get about Fenchow during the Japanese occupation and then in the '48 to '49?

ROISUM: The most we received was from Emma Noreen because she

was detained and worked in the hospital. She closed up the house where we had lived. I often wondered what they found and who found first what she had buried in the walls of the basement, for instance. During the Japanese occupation she was very much respected and was not ill-treated even though she was under house arrest. But she continued working in the hospital. I recall one incident that she told: One of the Japanese soldiers gave her the name and address of his parents. He said that he expected never to live to go back to his family. When she returned to the United States, if she had the opportunity, he would appreciate it if she would stop to see his family. And I think she did. She was alone, at least for part of the time, through the Japanese occupation. She had what I was commenting about a few minutes ago, that inner strength to be her own person and to carry on. I think she prepared a textbook for nurses during the time of her house arrest.

She told me, too, that she studied her Chinese language very intensively, memorized, I think, most of the Psalms, and carried water for considerable distance for her plants.

I: At this point I can think of no more questions. Is there anything else that you would like to add to the record?

ROISUM: No, I think not. It's been so long ago. My experiences from that period of time were so limited. I suppose this experience influenced my feeling toward other peoples and other races so that I probably have had less difficulty in thinking of people of other countries and other races as fellow human

beings than many people of my generation who didn't have the experience that I did.

I: Thank you so much for giving us your time and sharing your China experience.